

DECADENCE OF THE HUMAN CHARACTER – TOM BUCHANAN

Ivan Štrba

Abstract: Tom Buchanan is by far the most unpleasant character in the novel. Enjoying his social status connected to power, he is uncommitted to any code of ethics. His fears for the decline of civilization can be found rather ironic, since his brutal arrogance and complete lack of moral concern are the measure of the decline itself. His own inefficiency explains his conservative position, for he is afraid of both the power of the newly rich, such as Gatsby, and of the political transformation which may emerge from the proliferation of new races in society. Above all, he is portrayed as a delinquent protected by social conventions which conceal his misdeeds, who tries to camouflage his misbehaviour by appealing to a moral order.

Key words: Gatsby, Buchanan, character, American dream, decadence

Although the stem of the American Dream roots in the ‘general’ conception of freedom, opportunity and yet-to-be-fulfilled potential, over the years it had become more of a personal matter, thus lauding the individual and its struggle (or maybe a blissful contest) as the pivotal driving force that moves or destroys the nation’s advance on the scale of morality. Dissection of the individual characters should then depict and illuminate this struggle within. In the form of his character Tom Buchanan, Fitzgerald seems to have launched one of the most intense and devastating attacks on the upper classes. Although the title might suggest Gatsby being the main hero and character of the novel, I am rather convinced that Fitzgerald’s intensions were rather that of an equilibrial nature; one character shall not be predominant over the others since it would prevent the author from creating the dense mood of the clash of contradictory forces.

Jay Gatsby, however ambiguous, possesses the quality of innocent ‘naiveté’, which is faced with the antagonistic discord of the pernicious commercial tumour, of which Tom is its prominent protagonist. Fitzgerald had also had great liking for Tom as a character and shortly after finishing the novel, expressed his satisfaction in a letter to Maxwell Perkins: “I suppose he’s the best character I’ve ever done – I think he and the brother in Salt and Hurtswood in Sister Carrie are the three best characters in American fiction in the last twenty years.” (in Turnbull 173) Whereas his eponymous ‘central’ character embodies the stereotype of the self-made man who has risen from nowhere, Tom represents the type of millionaire that is berthed in an undivided tradition of socially acceptable (because inherited) wealth, and of the power derived from it. Tony Tanner only supports this suggestion, pointing out: “Buchanan is no more grounded in, or significantly related to, ancient American history than Gatsby” (p. xii). His social extrinsic self, which primarily consists of an awareness of his own wealth and the respectability that derives from it, furnishes him with a solid and established identity, in sharp contrast to Gatsby, who is forever seeking to create his own personality anew. As the notion of decline lies at both the title of the chapter and the heart of the novel, I suggest that an analysis of Tom Buchanan’s wealth and character are instrumental in understanding the limits of Fitzgerald’s seductive fascination with riches, which, as Malcolm Cowley hints, sets some of his works within the romance-of-money category (19).

Tom Buchanan, unlike Gatsby, belongs to an older-established world of (inherited) wealth. In Chapter I Nick recalls:

His family were enormously wealthy – even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach – but now he’d left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away: for instance, he’d brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that. (p. 8-9)

When marrying Daisy, the pearls “valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars” (p. 60) visibly proclaim Daisy’s social value as his wife. Tom himself has no doubts about the social value of his house on the fashionable Long Island shore: “It belonged to Demaine, the oil man” (p. 10). That is all he needs to say to locate its place in the social hierarchy. Tom’s view of society is totally hierarchical, his own position by established right being at the top. His enormous inheritance thus puts him in the utterly opposite position of the self-made man, a concept forged toward the end of 19th century. This concept¹ lays emphasis on the fact that the millionaire is the product of the laws of natural selection and, in the struggle for survival, the money become a token of one’s successful adaptation to the environment. This is supported by Graham Summer, who argues that “The Millionaires may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. This assures us that all who are competent for this function will be employed in it, so that the cost of it will be reduced to the lowest terms” (90).

The myth of the self-made man stressed the notion that the most important goal was individual betterment, which could be achieved via a combination of hard work and strength of character, regardless of one’s social origins. This was, as J.F. Wall said, “an essential part of the American dream to believe that the most fit sons in the race for material success were sired by fathers who had failed in that race.” (380) Poverty is thus endowed with much greater odds for success than the elite and its cornucopia forlorn comfort. Andrew Carnegie ruminates on this idea further:

Let one select the three or four names, the supremely great in every field of human triumph, and note how small is the contribution of hereditary rank and wealth to the short list of immortals who have lifted and advanced in race. It will, I think, be seen that the possession of these is almost fatal to greatness and goodness, and that the greatest and best of our race have necessarily been nurtured in the bracing school of poverty – the only school capable of producing the supremely great, the genius. (Carnegie 64)

We are made to feel that the hereditary wealth has endowed its possessors with negative qualities. In fact, money ‘earned’ without labour could be perceived as an invitation to corruption and it may be assumed that hereditary wealth has been the very cause of the decline in Europe. As Carnegie further states, “the duty of the man of wealth: to set an example of modest, unostentatious living, shunning display or extravagance.” (25) What he means is that, although by definition the wealthy millionaire should not abandon the relationship between his fortune and the community from which it was derived. The possessors of dynastic wealth, as Wall points out, feared its consequences and it was seen as alien both to the productive process and to the progress of society. (380) In the 1920s, the hereditary millionaire had simply become a consumer who put away the role of producer, and this aspect of Tom’s personality is closely developed and attained throughout the novel.

It is Nick who is constantly aware of Buchanan’s habits and features that serve the status mentioned above. When Nick sees Tom for the first time, he appears “in riding clothes... standing with legs apart on the front porch.” (p. 9) Both his clothing and relaxed pose suggest a way of life which has nothing to do with the actual production of wealth via means of fecund labour. Thus Buchanan fits into the category of the leisure class, a term coined by Thorstein Veblen, which embodies a group of individuals who live off the fruits of the industrial community rather than within it. A millionaire is thus free to waste money and time on idle amusements and unnecessary goods, whereas the rest of the industrial population has to perform manual work in order to survive. (Veblen 70)

¹ Social Darwinism, a term coined in the late 19th century to describe the idea that humans, like animals and plants, compete in a struggle for existence in which natural selection results in ‘survival of the fittest’. Social Darwinists base their beliefs on theories of evolution developed by British naturalist Charles Darwin. Some social Darwinists argue that governments should not interfere with human competition by attempting to regulate the economy or cure social ills such as poverty. Instead, they advocate a laissez-faire political and economic system that favors competition and self-interest in social and business affairs. Social Darwinists typically deny that they advocate a ‘law of the jungle’. But most propose arguments that justify imbalances of power between individuals, races, and nations because they consider some people more fit to survive than others.

Buchanan's life is often associated with sports, since it is his wealth that allows him to play sports everywhere, and it seems that it is sports rather than business that shapes and determines his 'business' and travels, when he "drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together." (p. 9) Veblen pays particular attention to sports when describing the leisure class, for he sees the modern enjoyment of sports, reminiscent of a combative instinct, originating from feudal society, where labour was no longer valued by the community (of the rich). As he further notes, "Sports... afford and exercise for dexterity and for the emulative ferocity and astuteness characteristic of predatory life" (236). This explains why Buchanan is often associated with physical violence.

Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of his body – he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body of enormous leverage – a cruel body. (p. 9)

This memorable description effectively implants Tom in the reader's imagination, the emphasis on barely restrained physical power denoting his mental attitude. A tense man, barely able to contain his violent tendencies even at the dinner party in Chapter I, he suddenly introduces a bizarre notion into the conversation:

'Civilization is going to pieces,' broke out Tom violently. 'I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read The Rise of the Coloured Empires by this man Goddard?'² ... 'Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged...' ... This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.' (p. 14)

What Tom is reproducing here are repulsive theories buttressing his own sense of racial and cultural superiority. Tom is a bully whose every word echoes his sense of innate superiority. What makes him particularly repulsive is his blindness to the truth about himself, thus inevitably implying the double standard of judgment. Buchanan is always eager to affirm his physical superiority over everyone else, although his affirmations are often expressed in terms that show evidence of dubious sort of reasoning: "Now, don't think my opinion on these matters is final, ... just because I'm stronger and more of a man than you are." (p. 9 – 10)

Clannishness, massiveness, ferocity, and unscrupulousness would have been the very qualities that would gain one an entrance to the leisure class, as Veblen suggests. (236) Carelessness and callousness, so peculiar to the Buchanans, could be considered among the other virtues which they were capable of within a word or two. As Nick comments, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made... ." (p. 142) One can ignore the consequences of their action only if possessing social power.

This carelessness and irresponsibility for other people's lives is demonstrated when Nick asks Tom about what he said to Wilson during the afternoon of the accident:

² Goddard is believed to be an amalgam of the names of two race thinkers: Madison Grant (1865 – 1937) and Lothrop Stoddard (1883-1950). A book called *The Rising Tide of Colour* by the latter was published in 1910. As Brucoli suspects, Fitzgerald changed the name deliberately. (1974: 33) M. Grant argued, in his book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1918), that due to a process of natural selection, the Nordic race had achieved a status which made it entirely responsible for all progress and civilization. (39) The main point of Grant's argument is confirmed in the novel by Tom, saying that "This idea is that we're Nordics... and we've produced all the things that go to make civilization – oh, science and art and all that." (p. 14) Paradoxically, the fact that he appropriates this ideology only serves the purpose of underscoring his weakness. The Nordic race may embody vigour as well as mental and spiritual energies, but these qualities are totally absent from Buchanan's life. Indeed, the harsh contrast between what Buchanan pretends to be (an individual with Nordic race qualities) and what he really is (a millionaire who owes his privileged society to the efforts of the previous generations), serves to throw his decadence into relief.

I told him the truth” he said. “He came to the door while we were getting ready to leave.... He was crazy enough to kill me if I hadn’t told him who owned the car....” He broke off defiantly, “What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him. He threw dust unto your eyes just like he did in Daisy’s but he was a tough one. He ran over Myrtle like you’d run over a dog and never even stopped his car. (p. 142)

Buchanan’s role in Gatsby’s holocaust is thus revealed. Moreover, his revenge accentuates the main features of his social decay. His destruction of Gatsby, which avoids any direct confrontation through the subtle means that he employs, and his subsequent denial of any responsibility for his actions display a degree of cunning and sophisticated contrivance.

Another aspect that hints on the putrescence of Buchanan’s morality is the absence of action other than reaction. During much of the novel Buchanan acts as a passive individual. Even his eventual action is only responsive, unlike Gatsby’s, who creates his own self in a burst of initiative that could be considered as a mark of the beginning in his social rise. Moreover, being looked at as ‘gangster’, Gatsby is still capable of some kind of honour, deciding not to escape to Chicago but stand by Daisy after the accident. However, Buchanan never runs risks. Satisfied by his revenge, Buchanan returns to his former passive state, comforted in his colonial mansion. Tom Buchanan confirms Carnegies’s suspicions of hereditary wealth as an element of decadence in American society. In fact, heritage, in both a social and biological sense, represents the key to understand his personality as well as his place in the novel His social heritage places him in the position of a member of the leisure class, that is, mainly as a consumer rather than a creator of wealth for society.

Tom Buchanan represents the individual who is unsuited to the labours of ordinary life. His extreme moral degeneration gives new meaning to the role that Gatsby plays. Although Gatsby is, in the broader terms of his society, a delinquent, he embodies a series of virtues that are totally missing in the America of which Tom Buchanan is paradigmatic, such as vitality, efficiency³, loyalty, and the necessity of a realizable dream. What the novel suggests is that in a world dominated by millionaires such as Buchanan, it becomes more and more difficult for men like Gatsby, whatever their mistakes and deficiencies, to climb the social ladder without partaking of the corruption that is associated with the leisure class. In the long run, it seems probable that Buchanan’s class would dictate the rules of the society to which Gatsby aspires, thus making it hard for such self-made men to escape its corrosive influence. As Marius Bewley has commented of Gatsby: “A great part of Fitzgerald’s achievement is that he suggests effectively that these terrifying deficiencies of Gatsby, ... are deficiencies inherent in contemporary manifestations of the American vision itself – a vision no doubt admirable, but stupidly defenceless before the equally American world of Tom and Daisy” (Bewley 140 – 41).

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³ Unlike Tom and other high-strata members, Gatsby makes his living, he is not simply imposed to it. His activities are numerous, though not often clearly uncovered.

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Author

Mgr. Ivan Štrba, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences, University of Prešov, Prešov, Slovakia, email: strba@unipo.sk